

WHAT IT IS

Rational and irrational fears can quietly shape a college student's success by influencing how they make decisions, manage stress, and engage with support. Rational fears, such as concern about failing a course or managing finances, can motivate planning and help-seeking when they remain proportional to the situation. Irrational fears, however, often exaggerate consequences ("If I mess this up, everything is over") and push students toward avoidance, procrastination, or isolation, which can derail academics, sleep, and well-being. When fears drive behavior rather than inform it, students may stop taking healthy risks, delay asking for help, or misread temporary setbacks as permanent failures, making it harder to persist and succeed.

WHO TO USE IT WITH

These groups benefit when fears are named, normalized, and reframed into proportionate, problem-solving responses rather than avoidance.

- First-year students navigating unfamiliar academic expectations
- Students with anxiety or perfectionism
- Neurodivergent students or students with executive-function challenges
- First-generation or low-income students
- Students in high-stakes programs (pre-med, engineering, law-track, competitive majors)

QUESTIONS TO ASK

1. What worries you most about school or this semester?
2. When something doesn't go as planned, what do you usually tell yourself about what it means?
3. Are there things you've been putting off because they feel stressful?
4. What happens if an assignment, exam, or conversation doesn't go perfectly in your mind?
5. Who do you usually talk to when you're stressed or unsure?
6. If we could make one thing feel more manageable this week, what would help?

TEACHING INSIGHTS

Signal vs. Story:

Rational fear is a signal based on real information that helps you problem-solve ("I didn't study enough for this quiz, so I should review tonight"). Irrational fear is a story your mind adds that exaggerates consequences or predicts disaster ("If I fail, everything is ruined"), and learning to separate the signal from the story helps students respond instead of freeze.

Discomfort vs. Danger:

Many students interpret discomfort (anxiety, uncertainty, embarrassment) as danger, even when they are safe and capable. Teaching students to notice the difference helps them take healthy action despite discomfort, rather than avoiding tasks that feel scary but are not actually threatening.